

State regulation of vice : address / by Mrs. Butler.

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STATE REGULATION OF VICE.

ADDRESS BY MRS BUTLER.

At the Annual Meeting of the "Ladies' National Association for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution," held at Hull, October 19th, 1876, the following Resolution was moved and seconded:

"That this meeting regards the Government Superintendence and Regulation of Vice as embodied in the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1866-9, as in the highest degree immoral, and calculated to degrade the character and life of both men and women: the meeting also protests against the Acts as a gross infringement of the liberty of women, and a serious danger to their honour and virtue. Having regard to the great importance of promoting an equal standard of morality in both sexes, this meeting moreover earnestly calls upon women of every section of society to insist upon purity of life in men, as well as women, as a necessary condition of personal friendship and esteem."

Mrs Butler supported the Resolution, and, though the hour was late, and the darkness of evening had fallen upon the immense concourse of women assembled, no one left, and the attention continued to be intense until she had concluded an address of considerable length. Mrs Butler evidently felt that, in spite of all the earnest addresses made that afternoon, it was probable that many of those present did not yet clearly understand the true nature of this evil thing, this unjust legislation, which we are banded together to destroy. She, therefore, explained the nature and purpose of the Acts, or rather explained the whole system of State regulation throughout the world in its broad and hideous lines. An audible sign or shudder passed through the whole meeting from time to time; the subject had taken hold of all present; the situation was realized, the danger to our country, and the necessity to be up and doing; and the sense of pity for the wronged, and indignation against the wrong, were touchingly and audibly expressed.

Mrs Butler said, it has struck me as the meeting went on, that after all, there may be many here who have not a very clear idea of what these laws are which we are fighting against. Now I will try to explain to you, very simply and very briefly, what it is we are fighting against, and I am prepared to prove by all the experience and all the knowledge gained in the last seven years in this work, that what I say is the absolute truth. You all know, friends, what is the meaning of the awful word "prostitution." You know that prostitution is, perhaps, of all evils that have scourged humanity, the greatest and the darkest. Oh! what woes, what wrongs, what sorrows, what agonies, what diseases, what suicides, murders, assassinations, deaths, are wrapped up in the one terrible word, "prostitution,"—prostitution, the scourge of humanity, the typical crime of the universe from the beginning till now. Now, in these latter days, men have grown wise, according to the world, but not in the "wisdom

that is from above." In these latter days, on the Continent and in England, men have looked at this great evil of prostitution, and they have said to themselves, "Let us put out our hand, and try to do something to diminish," not the sin, but—"the physical scourge" which follows the sin,—for there is a horrible disease which is the accompaniment of this sin. Therefore, "practical men" of the world have said to themselves, "Go to! let us try to cure this disease;" they care little about the sin. It is well they should try to cure the disease, and I am not finding fault with the medical men and law-makers who wished to do so. I would not say that the motives of all of them were bad; but I will say that they were blind, they had not the wisdom from above, they knew not what they did when they attempted merely to cure the disease whilst they not only let the sin alone, but adopted measures which increase the vice. Their act was folly in the highest degree. Now these men, looking at the great scourge of prostitution, what should they have done? Should they not have said, "Let us band ourselves together; let us consult and act to the best of our power to lessen this evil on all sides. Let us give to women more work and better wages, so that they may not fall into evil ways. Let us protect young girls; let us throw open more avenues of employment to poor women who have to maintain themselves, and often their families, too; let us make war against drunkenness; let us protect the young and the unprotected; let us punish the seducers of little children; and, above all, let us teach our young men, those in our schools and colleges and workshops, that they are bound as much as women to live pure and decent lives." This is what these wise men should have said and done; but they did not. I am telling you the truth; what they said in Paris, in Vienna, in Rome and Berlin, and later in London, was this, "Let us legalize prostitution,"—yes, *legalize*, I say,—"wherever it exists," and they acted accordingly. Now the mode of legalizing it is this: In the first instance, it is provided that a great register is to be made of all women who may come under the denomination of "common prostitutes,"—a diabolical record is opened, the register of hell! But how and why do they get them on to this register, and what do they do with them when they are on it? The motive is to get them on the register and keep them always under the eye of the police and certain State-appointed doctors, and thus to maintain them in good health in order that they may go on in their sin, and that in doing so they may not, forsooth, infect the vicious men who come voluntarily to sin with them. Vicious men are the worst of the two. Hundreds of women sin because they are so poor, and it is easier to get money by this vice than by honest work; but when the man sins he has no such excuse. Women are registered and kept in good health by Government surgeons, by means too awful and horrible for me to speak of in your presence. They are kept—some in brothels, some living in their own private lodgings, looked after night and day; brought into hospital-prisons when sick, not sent out till cured, when—with the Government stamp upon them as Government harlots—they are believed to provide men with safe vice; their occupation is protected and patented as if it were an honest industry. Now, how do they get them on to the register? If you traverse any of the streets of our great cities in this country, you see numbers of poor people, women and girls of every shade of character and degree of poverty.

Spy policemen in plain clothes are sent from London, from Scotland Yard, to walk about the streets by day and night, with absolute powers over all these women of the poorer classes whom they meet. Under this law, a policeman has power to lay his hand on the shoulder of any woman whom he chooses to suspect of not being moral in her life; and instead of having a fair trial as a thief or robber or assassin has, she has no trial, for she is taken (if she resents) before a magistrate, and the oath of a policeman is sufficient for his proceedings to be confirmed. But far more often she is taken off and registered a common prostitute, without ever seeing the face of a magistrate, and on the suspicion of a spy policeman only. He does not need to swear that he has seen her do anything wrong; he does not need to swear that he knows she is a common prostitute, but only that he has reason to believe that she is one. This is the way in which they get the register filled, and it is for their interest to get as many as possible on it. I have briefly explained to you the system, but you can learn it more fully from many of the papers supplied to you. I have twice visited the Continent of Europe in the pursuit of this work. Finding our Englishmen, especially those in the House of Commons, so stupid and ignorant as to refuse to repeal these laws, we have thought that by going to the Continent and raising up a great war against this system there, we could come round and take England in flank, to use a military form of expression, and that we should come from the Continent with such a moral force of public opinion, that England would then see how foolish and guilty she had been in dressing herself proudly in the cast-off and filthy rags which other countries are throwing away from them. I have alluded to the fact of my two visits to the Continent, to give you one or two cases to illustrate what speakers this evening have already told you, particularly as to the slavery, the absolute slavery, of women who are brought under this system in any country. We call ourselves the New Abolitionists, to abolish this horrible slavery of women all over the world. The women under this system are entirely the slaves of the police and the doctors, and that vile class of people the brothel keepers. On the Continent I met a great many friends who are working with us to upset the system; and one gentleman told me of what he had seen at a railway station at Liège, and there were three ministers of religion present who attested to this fact. You know wherever there is a slavery there must be a slave trade, because you need slaves to fill up the market; and so in this case, women are sent from one country to another as slaves, bought and sold, a "morals" policeman sometimes going with them and taking their tickets. At Liège two trucks were found at the railway station crowded with young girls—quite young, many of them not more than thirteen, "crowded like cattle." They were under the charge of one of the policemen of the system. He was conveying them from a certain brothel in Liège to hand them over wholesale to another brothel in Paris (because these people find it desirable to have an exchange of slaves, to have a constant circulation, or it secures variety to the purchasers). These poor girls did not wish to be taken to Paris. Some of them perhaps hoped, wished, to get free, and some of them began to cry, and the infection spread, and they all became more or less hysterical, and said they would not go. This policeman thereupon put manacles upon their hands and fastened them behind

their backs, and they were thus taken as slaves in chains from one brothel to the other, in Christian Europe. This is with the knowledge and permission of the authorities. This is an illustration of what will come to us if we don't prevent it, and indeed now we are not free from it in England, for girls are here already bought and sold under this system. The result of this system on the Continent and wherever it exists is this—that it lowers the moral tone of the whole community. Men and women insensibly, in the course of ten or twenty years, are lowered in their tone of morality, for it is almost impossible to live in an atmosphere so permeated with moral corruption and not to be affected by it. In illustration of this, Mrs Butler said—In Brussels, which I visited a few weeks ago—(this was told me by a minister of religion, a M. Durand)—some Protestant girls were sent from Frankfort, which is a Protestant city, to the one I speak of, which is a Catholic city. They were recommended to a minister's special charge, and he was asked to use his influence that they might become members of his church. He made their acquaintance. One had found a situation in a refreshment room of the first class in Brussels, and he sent asking if she would come to be a member of the church and receive her first communion. He received a letter in reply from her employer to say, "I have just had — registered as a prostitute. She will have to go up to the doctor's to-morrow, and then she can come to the Holy Communion." Such facts as this I have given are not uncommon, and are attested by the highest authorities on the Continent. You will see the horrible attempt there is here to combine light and darkness, to bring about a union between Christ and Belial. What a lowering mist and darkness comes over the whole of the moral sense. In the case I have alluded to, the explanation of the master's conduct is simple enough. The Acts are in force in this place. Every girl who attends in refreshment rooms incurs suspicion, and the best thing the master can do—(his convenience is)—to have the girls registered as prostitutes. But so depraved was this man that he thought the girl could become a member of a Christian Church, and at the same time be registered as a minister to the worst of our social sins. I need say no more of the horrors coming on our country in the wake of this system. They are not here so great as on the Continent, but unless we get the Acts repealed, they will come upon us. I should just like to say in conclusion, deeply painful and awful as the subject is, we on this platform can testify most solemnly to this truth: that though we have suffered agonies in taking up this work, we find in it, increasingly, as we go on, a sweetness, a peace of mind, a strength and a reward, such as God knows how to give to those who can bear to take up a little cross for His sake. (Great applause).

Those who would wish further information, or are willing to unite in efforts for the Repeal of Laws which virtually license prostitution, are invited to correspond with Mrs JOSEPHINE BUTLER, Secretary, 348 Park Road, Liverpool; Mrs ARTHUR TANNER, Sidcot, Bristol, Treasurer to the Ladies' National Association; or Mrs NICHOL, Huntly Lodge, Merchiston, or Miss WIGHAM, 5 Gray Street, President and Secretary of the Edinburgh Ladies' Association.